

## Transcript

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Tet (1968)

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**GENERAL WILLIAM C. WESTMORELAND** (Commander, Vietnam): *In 1968 a new phase is now starting. We have reached an important point when the end begins to come into view.*

**NARRATOR:** Tet, the Vietnamese New Year. A massive Vietcong and North Vietnamese offensive struck the cities of South Vietnam. The attacks spilled into the living rooms of America and split the White House staff.

**WALT W. ROSTOW (National Security Adviser):** Yes, I was optimistic after the Tet offensive -- even more optimistic in a sense than before -- because it's one thing to have confidence that you're going to cope with this maximum effort. It's another thing to see that everyone was coping. You'll see that the cables from Saigon, from Ambassador Bunker, told us that the enemy was defeated on the ground very early. It would take time to mop up.

**HARRY MCPHERSON (Counsel to the President):** For the rest of us who were not in the National Security Council staff -- even though we were reading many of those cables and going down there for such reassurance as we could get -- we were also watching the American television. And American television was showing a different sight. That sense of the awfulness, the endlessness of the war. The unethical quality that did not recognize that when a man was taken prisoner, he was not to be shot at point blank range. The terrible sight of General Luan raising his revolver to the head of a captured Vietcong and killing him. They were awful contradictions -- the cables on the one side, the television on the other. It was very disturbing.

**NARRATOR:** Vietnam was history's first television war. Now as the fighting ripped into Saigon, millions of Americans watched the battle on the evening news.

**MILITARY POLICEMAN:** *We've got another, two more alert forces that are trying to push him out this way but he's got -- he's heavily fortified. He's got a lot of ammo.*

**REPORTER 1:** *What's he got, small arms?*

**MP:** *Small arms, automatic fire, grenade launcher, and hand grenades.*

**REPORTER 1:** *You lost any men here?*

**MP:** *Well, I've got, uh five, five, six, six people I've had wounded.*

**REPORTER 2:** *Now CIA men and MPs have gone into the embassy and are trying to get the snipers out by themselves.*

**NARRATOR:** Nothing dramatized the Vietcong's drive more vividly to Americans than the scene inside the U.S. Embassy compound in Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital. The center of American power in Vietnam had come under fire.

**REPORTER 3:** *General, how would you assess yesterday's activities and today's? What is the enemy doing? Are these major attacks or (explosion)...*

**GENERAL WESTMORELAND:** *That's EOD setting off a couple of M-79 duds, I believe.*

**REPORTER 3:** *General, how would you assess the enemy's purposes yesterday and today?*

**GENERAL WESTMORELAND:** *The enemy, very deceitfully, has taken advantage of the Tet truce in order to create maximum consternation within South Vietnam, particularly in the populated areas.*

**NARRATOR:** The consternation was indeed maximum. For years the North Vietnamese and Vietcong had fought mainly in the rice fields and jungles. Now, for the first time, they were fighting in the cities -- in their biggest offensive of the war. They hit nearly every province and district capital across South Vietnam. They hit Westmoreland's own headquarters near the Saigon airport. They hit key targets throughout Saigon, including

the government radio station.

*REPORTER, February 1968: This is the main Vietnamese language radio station in Saigon, and right now there are an undisclosed number of VC inside occupying the station. They're not broadcasting on the air and they're surrounded by South Vietnamese troops. And they're pinned down inside. We think they're going to be throwing, we think they're going to be throwing tear gas any moment now to try to get them out that way. There's been a lot of shooting out the windows from inside up on the second floor.*

**DANG XUAN TEO:** A comrade inside the radio station had captured an enemy machine gun and had fought with it throughout the night. By nine o'clock in the morning, he had only 20 rounds left. He was wounded, his leg shattered. He asked me to go and find out whether he should try to hold the place or blow it up. At about ten o'clock in the morning, we had only eight men inside with a very large explosive. They detonated the explosive, destroying the entire radio station and sacrificed themselves in the blast.

**NARRATOR:** U.S. combat troops had been in Vietnam for nearly three years before Tet, 1968. Yet all their superior power had failed to grind down the enemy. The war was deadlocked.

In July 1967, Communist planners in Hanoi debated their next move. Some wanted to continue their war of attrition. But Ho Chi Minh approved a bold offensive designed to break the deadlock and open the way to power.

The war in 1967 posed a different problem for Lyndon Johnson. He had to raise taxes to continue both the war and his social programs. To rally domestic support, he had to promise light at the end of the tunnel.

**November 16, 1967** *REPORTER:* How do you see it, General?

*GENERAL WESTMORELAND:* Very very encouraged. I've never been more encouraged during my entire, almost four years in this country. I think we're making real progress. Everybody is very optimistic that I know of, who is intimately associated with our effort there.

*GENERAL EARLE WHEELER (Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff):* We feel that on the military side there has been substantial progress over the past two years, that in the last six months, the progress has been even more rapid than in the 18 months before that.

**PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON,** December 22, 1967: All the challenges have been met. The enemy is not beaten but he knows that he has met his master in the field.

**NARRATOR:** Johnson had orchestrated this campaign of optimism only weeks before Tet. But he had reason to believe an enemy attack of some kind was coming. During the two previous years, the Communists had staged winter offensives along South Vietnam's borders. Now as U.S. intelligence detected large deployments moving south, Westmoreland expected similar assaults. He rushed 6,000 American Marines and South Vietnamese troops to Khesanh, a remote frontier outpost near the Ho Chi Minh Trail. From here he had hoped to control North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam's northern provinces. The North Vietnamese attacked Khesanh in January, several days before Tet. Westmoreland thought this would be a decisive engagement.

**GENERAL WESTMORELAND,** January 22, 1968: I think his plans concerned a major effort to win a spectacular battlefield success on the eve of Tet, which is the Chinese New Year, which takes place at the end of this month.

**NARRATOR:** Johnson was so concerned that he kept a model of Khesanh in the White House. But neither he nor his generals then fully knew the Communists' real purpose in fighting there.

**GENERAL WESTMORELAND:** I did feel it was a target that the enemy was very much interested in, that he would want to seize it. And I wanted to fight him in the hinterland rather than allow him to get down among the people, which would have been very costly in casualties.

**CAPT. TRAN DINH THONG (North Vietnam):** Our objective was to inflict casualties on the enemy of Khesanh, thus compelling him to shift

more of his forces there from the southern part of the country. In that way, it would be possible for our people to organize in order to liberate the South. But because we drew larger enemy forces into Khesanh, and allowed them to supply and reinforce themselves, we could not turn the encounter into a final big battle.

**NARRATOR:** Days after they began to shell Khesanh, the Communist commanders issued final orders for their nationwide offensive against South Vietnam's cities. The longest battle was waged for Hue, the old imperial capital. Survivors of the battle tell different stories. One is a refugee with family still in Vietnam.

**REFUGEE FROM HUE:** The night of Tet, the lunar New Year, was different from other New Year's eves. Firecrackers went on longer. They came faster and faster. There were more -- many more -- than on other New Years. The sounds of firecrackers and gunfire interspersed. Nobody realized that it was the gunfire of Communists who were overrunning the city of Hue.

**PHAM THI XUAN QUE (Vietcong):** At that time, I was at the nursing school, now the secondary school for nurses. I was among the students there, and weapons were smuggled into us. At the nursing school we also managed to print a number of leaflets and tracts for the National Liberation Front calling on the population to remain calm and not carry out reprisals when its forces entered the city. For example, when people arrested an enemy agent, they were to turn him over to the cadres.

**REFUGEE FROM HUE:** Communist soldiers came in and asked my father his occupation and his residence. They told my father to describe his background. My father replied that he was deputy district chief of Trieuphong and that he was already old and would retire in one year. They wrote down everything, then went on to other houses.

**NARRATOR:** The North Vietnamese and Vietcong dominated Hue for three days. They rounded up South Vietnamese officials and government sympathizers. Some eluded arrest and fled with other civilians. Many did not.

**REFUGEE FROM HUE:** My father was ordered to attend a study session for ten days, and he was told that he would be released afterward. My mother and I accompanied him to the school. There were about 100 persons there. We stayed there until we saw my father leave. My mother and I were very worried because in 1946, my father's father had been arrested in the same way by the Communists. He never returned.

**HOANG PHU NGOG TUONG:** The people so hated those who had tortured them in the past that, when the revolution came to Hue, they rooted out those despots to get rid of them -- just as they would poisonous snakes who, if allowed to live, would commit further crimes.

**NARRATOR:** Troops of South Vietnam's First Infantry Division joined U.S. Marines in the counter-attack against Hue. Many were fighting for their homes and for an historic city. The Nguyen emperors had built the Citadel, Hue's walled fortress, early in the nineteenth century. They modeled it on the impregnable Forbidden City in Peking, the Chinese capital. The North Vietnamese army set up a command post next to the throne, in the Palace of Perfect Peace. Delta Company, First Battalion, Fifth Regiment, U.S. Marines headed for the Citadel.

**CAPTAIN MYRON HARRINGTON:** I think my most vivid memory as I went in was in talking with one of the other company commanders who had already been participating there in the action for a couple of days, and in a very matter-of-fact way without a great deal of embellishment on his part he just frightened the hell out of me in telling me how bad it was. And I thought in my mind right then and there that, you know, hey, here I am with a fresh company and I knew without having to be told that what my mission was going to be the next day, was going to be to go try to take this fortified tower position along the east wall. And, sure enough, that evening when I went in to be briefed, Major Thompson, he just said, "Delta Company, tomorrow you're going to take that east wall." And I said, "Aye, aye, sir" and went at it.

**REPORTER,** February 1968: What's the hardest part of it?

**MARINE:** Not knowing where they are -- that's the worst thing. Riding around, running in the sewers, the gutters, anywhere. Could be

anywhere. Just hope you can stay alive, day to day. Everybody just wants to go back home and go to school. That's about it.

**REPORTER:** Have you lost any friends?

**MARINE:** Quite a few. We lost one the other day. The whole thing stinks, really.

**NARRATOR:** Two days later, on February 14, Delta Company took the fortified tower, then moved on.

**CAPTAIN MYRON HARRINGTON:** We tried our best to avoid malicious damage, if you would. We just didn't shoot at walls just to blow them down. But when we had to shoot at a house, we shot at a house. When we had to destroy a house, we destroyed it. But we didn't go in there with the express purpose that this is a wonderful opportunity to show how great our weapons are and how much destructive power they possess. As a result of their being so entrenched, it required for us to bring maximum fire power at our disposal to eliminate them. But we were fortunate in that we did have the weapons that were capable of routing the NVA and the Vietcong out of their positions.

**NGUYEN THI HOA:** They directed artillery fire into the area where I lived. All the houses and trees were destroyed. They also directed rocket fire against the homes of the people in my neighborhood. The people here use kerosene and gasoline, and so their homes burst into flames when they were hit by the rockets. Old folks -- children and pregnant women who could not flee -- were burned alive in their homes.

**CAPT. MYRON HARRINGTON:** And throughout all of this, you constantly had this fear. Not so much that you were going to die, because I think to a certain degree that was a given. This was combined with the semi-darkness type of environment that we were fighting in because of the low overcast -- the fact that we didn't see the sun -- gave it a very eerie, spooky look. You had this utter devastation all around you. You had this horrible smell. I mean you just cannot describe the smell of death especially when you're looking at it a couple of weeks along.

It's horrible. It was there when you ate your rations. It was almost like you were eating death. You couldn't escape it.

**NARRATOR:** After 24 days of fierce fighting, South Vietnamese army units entered the Citadel and raised the flag of South Vietnam. Hue had been saved but destroyed. Seventy-five percent of its people were homeless. Eight thousand soldiers and civilians on both sides had been killed in the fighting. But the final toll was higher.

**REFUGEE FROM HUE:** In 1969, a Communist defected and told the chief of Thua Thien province that the Communists had buried a number of people in the Xuan O and Xuan Doi areas. The province chief ordered the bodies dug up, to exhume the remains of those who had been arrested during the Tet offensive. I, along with others whose relatives had been killed, inspected the remains. The smell was terrible, but we had loved and missed our relatives, and it was our duty to search for them. Those who found the remains of their relatives were gratified, and those who could not were sad. I continued looking along with others.

At Phu Tu, eight more tunnels were dug up. Strangely, all the skulls of the skeletons were smashed. Their arms were tied, and their positions indicated that they died kneeling. The skeletons were not stretched out. They were bundled up or huddled. I went on following the search party up until September 1969, but I never found my father's remains.

**NARRATOR:** The bodies found in the mass graves were solemnly buried by the South Vietnamese government -- bodies of officials, army officers, priests, students. Some, who bore no visible marks of violence, had presumably been buried alive. Twenty-eight hundred bodies were eventually found, and the massacre prompted U.S. and South Vietnamese officials to predict a bloodbath if the Communists won the war. For the Communists, however, the Tet offensive fell short of their expectations.

**CAPT. TRAN DINH THONG:** At that time, in the North, we had devoted our resources and our energy to the liberation of the South in 1968, and when this could not be achieved we certainly felt a little let down.

**MAJ. GEN. TRAN DO:** Looking back at it now, it is clear that the first objective -- the liberation of the South -- was not accomplished. But at



*that time we did attack the command centers of the American forces and the puppet regime in the urban areas as well as in the provinces. We attacked the provincial headquarters, the Saigon presidential palace, the various secret police headquarters and the radio stations. And in Saigon we fought our way into the American embassy, which was the most important American headquarters in the South.*

*We were able to occupy all these places, but we could not hold them. There-fore, we did not gain enough for the people to stage their general uprising.*

**GEN. VO. NGUYEN GIAP:** *For us, you know, strategy is never purely military. Our strategy is always a general, an integrated strategy: simultaneously military, political and diplomatic. Thus the Tet offensive of 1968 obviously had an objective that was both military and political.*

**NARRATOR:** *As a military operation, the offensive had failed. The southern Vietcong guerrilla forces had surfaced, to be killed or captured in large numbers. After 1968, the war was increasingly fought by North Vietnamese as a conventional conflict. The political goal of forcing President Thieu to accept a coalition government also failed.*

**NGUYEN VAN THIEU** (President, South Vietnam), February 1968: *What they have realized in the city that the people was against them. So I believe that the general uprising that they had hoped have not happened. They have met with the anti-Communist sentiment from the people in the city, so they failed in both countryside and city.*

**DEAN RUSK:** *But even though it was a considerable military set-back for the North Vietnamese and Vietcong out there on the ground, it was, in effect, a brilliant political victory for them here in the United States. I'm not sure I fully understand the reasons why that should have occurred, but it became very clear after the Tet offensive that many people at the grass roots, such as my cousins in Cherokee County, finally came to the conclusion that if we could not tell them when this war was going to end, and we couldn't in any good faith, that we might as well chuck it.*

**GEORGE CHRISTIAN (Presidential Aide):** *The Tet offensive came as a brutal surprise to President Johnson and all of his advisers. We had been led to believe that the Vietcong were pretty well defanged by that period, that the pacification program had worked very well, that most of the villages in South Vietnam were secure and that it was virtually impossible for the Vietcong to rise to the heights that they did in 1968.*

**NARRATOR:** *The shock of the Tet attacks forced Johnson, the commander-in-chief, to seek refuge in the military. Johnson, the president, said nothing to the nation. Tet had crystallized the dilemma of the war. Johnson wanted victory. But his enemy, though rebuffed, was still not defeated. Could he win now without expanding the war and committing more troops?*

**GEN. WILLIAM WESTMORELAND:** *At the time of the Tet offensive, I asked for only those troops that were on the way to me anyway, that had been promised, and had been organized. And I asked that they be accelerated.*

**NARRATOR:** *Johnson approved this request and sent off an airborne unit. But by now, Vietnam was draining America's overall military force. Johnson's generals pressed him to take a step he had always resisted: to call up the reserves, to gird the nation for a bigger war.*

**GEN. WILLIAM WESTMORELAND:** *Mr. Johnson then sent a message, "If you need further reinforcements, please call for them." I took no steps in that regard, until General Wheeler came over. He was the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. And Wheeler told me that it was a good prospect that the reserves would be mobilized, that the strategy would be changed. And if reserves are mobilized and our strategy was changed to be an offensive strategy that would break down some of the geo-graphical barriers of Laos and Cambodia and allow us to take the war to the enemy in a more effective way through the bombing campaign -- what would I want to bring the war to an end? It was in the context, then, of a contingency plan based on an assumption of a decision. And it was not request per se.*

**NARRATOR:** *But it was presented as Westmoreland's request for 206,000 troops for Vietnam. General Earle Wheeler said they were*

*needed to stop another attack. In fact, Wheeler planned to keep half the troops at home to replenish the depleted reserves. Another adviser wanted to use the troops to invade North Vietnam.*

**WALT W. ROSTOW (National Security Adviser):** *I thought that the extra troops would be justified, only if we used them in a very active policy to force an end to the war on the ground, through putting forces into North Vietnam as far north as Vien, and blocking off on the ground with U.S. forces the multiple trails in Laos.*

**NARRATOR:** *Johnson turned the troop request over to Clark Clifford, his new secretary of defense, a trusted adviser and supporter of the war from the beginning.*

**CLARK CLIFFORD:** *President Johnson appointed a task force as soon as I went into the Pentagon and named me chairman of the task force. The reason was that the military had specifically requested 206,000 more troops to be sent to Vietnam. He wanted that analyzed, he wanted us to determine how the troops could be gathered and sent, what the social, political, economic impact might be on the United States.*

**NARRATOR:** *The troop request came at a time when Johnson was concerned about Khesanh, where the Marine garrison was still besieged. Johnson believed the North Vietnamese still planned a major assault against Khesanh. The Marines, surrounded and outnumbered, were enduring deadly artillery barrages as they waited for the North Vietnamese to storm the base.*

**PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON,** March 1968: *Now to meet the needs of these fighting men, we shall do whatever is required. Make no mistake about it. I don't want a man in here to go back home thinking otherwise. We are going to win!*

**NARRATOR:** *Johnson did meet the needs of his men at Khesanh. He unleashed the Air Force against the North Vietnamese encircling the base in one of the most intensive bombing campaigns in history. By early March, assured that Khesanh was safe and the Tet offensive repelled, Johnson quietly shelved the request for 206,000 troops. But the troop request had deeply influenced his new secretary of defense.*

**CLARK CLIFFORD:** *I know for three full days I spent down in the tank with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, where you sit with all of the communications devices that go all over the world. We had long talks. How long would it take? They didn't know. How many more troops would it take? They didn't know. Would 206,000 answer the demand? They didn't know. Might there be more? Yes, there might be more. So, when it was all over, I said, "What is the plan to win the war in Vietnam?" Well, the only plan is that ultimately the attrition will wear down the North Vietnamese and they will have had enough. Is there any indication that we've reached that point? No, there isn't.*

*As a result of that kind of interview, and that kind of information, before the final examination was over and we submitted our reports to President Johnson, I had turned against the war.*

**PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON,** March 1968: *Well, we don't plan to surrender either, and we don't plan to pull out either, and we don't plan to let people influence us, and pressure and force us to divide our nation in a time of national peril. The hour is here!*

**CLARK CLIFFORD:** *I then decided that what I must do would be to get all of the strength that I could, because the mere fact that I had reached the conclusion was not very significant, because the decision really lay with President Johnson.*

**HARRY MCPHERSON (Counsel to the President):** *Clifford said, "I noticed you this afternoon at the State Department and it seems to me you and I are on the same side. And I think we should form a partnership. You should be the partner in the White House and I'll be the partner in the Pentagon. You tell me what goes on over there that you hear, and I'll tell you what happens over here, and together we'll get this country and our president out of this mess."*

**GEORGE CHRISTIAN (Presidential Aide):** *Harry was our "Secret Dove," Harry was very close to the President. Harry and I were close; Harry was close to other members of the White House staff.*

**CLARK CLIFFORD:** We began to develop a group, and I know that after a while the question would be very secretly, "Is he with us?" That means, Is he a part of this group that is organized and dedicated to changing Lyndon Johnson's mind? It was almost like some very similar expression used in the French Revolution, "Is he with us?"

**HARRY MCPHERSON:** Without his having to say so, getting us out of this mess did not mean putting in another two or 300,000 men in order to beat North Vietnam, the Vietcong; it meant to begin the process of de-escalation, as it was called -- disengagement of the United States. I was exhilarated.

**NARRATOR:** On March 10, The New York Times revealed the Pentagon's request for additional troops. The request had been a closely guarded secret. The disclosure stunned members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, then holding hearings on Vietnam. Secretary of State Dean Rusk was grilled on live television for two days.

#### **SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE, March 10, 1968**

**SEN. WAYNE MORSE:** There is incipient uprising in this country in opposition to this war and it's going to get worse. This talk about sending over 100,000, 200,000 more troops, you're going to create a very serious difficulty in this country if you people in the administration go through with that.

**SEN. MIKE MANSFIELD:** Now, Mr. Secretary, for some years we have been bombing the North. As I understand it, this bombing of the North had three purposes: one, to hurt North Vietnam. That's been done. Secondly, to stop the infiltration of men down across the parallel and the Ho Chi Minh trails. Has that been done?

**DEAN RUSK:** It has not been stopped completely, Senator. We never supposed that it could stop it completely, but we do know that it has had some major impact upon the capacity of the other side to carry out this infiltration and has cost them very heavily.

**SEN. MANSFIELD:** The rate of infiltration in 1965 was about 1,500 a month. In 1966 about 4,500 a month. In 1967 between 5,500 and 6,000 a month. And in 1968, it's my understanding that in January, 20,000 men came down from North Vietnam into South Vietnam. Is that a correct figure or a correct estimate?

**DEAN RUSK:** I would accept those as approximately correct, Sir.

**SEN. MANSFIELD:** Then, the third factor -- in addition to hurt, reducing infiltration -- the third factor was to bring Hanoi to the conference table. Are they any closer to the conference table now than they were when the bombing began?

**DEAN RUSK:** We have seen no evidence that they are prepared to undertake serious discussions toward a peaceful settlement of this situation.

**NARRATOR:** Senators Morse and Mansfield had long opposed the war. But after Tet, supporters like Senator Karl Mundt of South Dakota began to abandon Johnson.

**SEN. KARL MUNDT:** As one who has consistently supported the decision of the administration to stay on and press on with this war, I am totally and sorrowfully disappointed by your answer. And I think this is one of the great causes for dissension in this country. I am convinced the majority of Americans would like to see a priority, and unless it is established and announced by this administration, I think we're going to increase the divisiveness which I hate to see developing in this country.

**NARRATOR:** Now Congress wanted a change -- either victory or withdrawal. Congress, also concerned about the cost of the war, forced Johnson to trim his domestic programs. He could not spend more on a limited war, and he feared an expanded war.

**HARRY MCPHERSON:** Johnson's greatest fear, as he once put it, was that an American pilot was going to miss his target in Hanoi or Haiphong harbor and put a bomb down the smoke stack of a Russian freighter with the Russian minister on board and that the pilot would be from Johnson City, Texas. He was, he was extremely disturbed that we might provoke the Russians, or earlier the Chinese, into coming to the aid of Vietnam.

*And that was one of the, that was one of the tremendous dilemmas he had throughout the war when a great many Americans wanted the United States to go ahead and finish it off.*

**NARRATOR:** *Johnson also had to consider the war at home. Until then, he had dismissed street demonstrations. But 1968 was a presidential election year, and out of the growing anti-war sentiment, there emerged a peace candidate, thrust into prominence by the shock of the Tet offensive.*

**SEN. EUGENE MCCARTHY,** *February 1968: I am a candidate for the nomination of the presidency on the Democratic ticket. And I run for that office against an incumbent leader of our party, because I believe as I find many people in this country do believe now, and have for the last five or six months, that we are involved in a very deep crisis of leadership, a crisis of direction and a crisis of national purpose. The entire history of this war in Vietnam -- no matter what we call it -- has been one of continued error and of misjudgment.*

**NARRATOR:** *Senator Eugene McCarthy nearly beat Johnson in the New Hampshire primary, and the close vote jolted Johnson. At the time, it looked like a vote for peace. In fact, it was a vote against Johnson's conduct of the war. Most New Hampshire voters felt that he wasn't being tough enough. They favored getting out of a war he refused to win.*

**NARRATOR:** *Johnson was further rattled when Robert Kennedy joined the presidential race. The glamorous Kennedys had always worried him. Robert had switched to a peace platform, and Johnson smelled defeat in Wisconsin, the next primary. The faraway war was taking its toll at home.*

*Johnson turned to a group of elder statesmen called the "wise men." They had consistently backed his war policies. He convened them on March 25. They included establishment figures like former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, former Ambassador to Vietnam Maxwell Taylor, and former National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy.*

**MCGEORGE BUNDY:** *And our recommendation on the whole -- not without dissent and disagreement -- was that there should not be an increase in force levels in South Vietnam, and that there should be a modification of the policy of bombing North Vietnam.*

**CLARK CLIFFORD:** *Now here was a group saying, Mr. President, stop trying to win the war. Start cutting back. Don't send any more men. We think you ought to get out. It was a very bitter pill for him.*

**MCGEORGE BUNDY:** *I think he had himself decided really, that he would not do the ground force reinforcement, so it was more our gloominess in a way than our specific recommendations that he may have found troubling.*

**PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** *To meet price increases...*

**NARRATOR:** *On the afternoon of March 31, after two months of indecision, Johnson rehearsed an address to the nation scheduled for that evening.*

**PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** *...the estimate of those additional expenditures is, so get Clifford in to see what figures...this fiscal year...well you're going to have to get him in the next hour so you can mimeograph because George is going to want them, in that fiscal year.*

**NARRATOR:** *As late as March 28 his aides were still divided on Vietnam policy.*

**HARRY MCPHERSON:** *It was a strong "we will be in there, we will be fighting, they will not drive us out, we will save Vietnam" speech. There was a meeting in Secretary Rusk's office. Rusk, Clifford, Bill Bundy, the assistant secretary for the Far East, Rostow and me. Clifford said, "The speech is a disaster."*

**CLARK CLIFFORD:** *I thought the draft was dreadful. I thought that it was harsh. I thought that it talked about the continuation of the war. It talked about Tet, how Tet could be resolved. There was some suggestion about sending some of the men, not the whole 206,000. To me, it needed much changing and much amendment.*

**HARRY MCPHERSON:** *The really, the really surprising thing was that Rusk and Rostow did not fight Clifford on that, but began to speak as if, all*



right, let's, what do we have to put in line to write a different kind of speech? I went back and wrote a different speech -- a very different speech.

**CLARK CLIFFORD:** As a quick illustration, the first few sentences of that speech in the original draft said, "I wish to talk about the war in Vietnam." That was the first sentence. By the time the speech was written and rewritten -- we worked days on it before it was given -- the first sentence read:

**PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON,** March 31, 1968: Good evening, my fellow Americans. Tonight I want to speak to you of peace in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

**CLARK CLIFFORD:** And that speech was almost a complete reversal of what the speech started out to be.

**PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** Tonight, I have ordered our aircraft and our naval vessels to make no attacks on North Vietnam, except in the area north of the demilitarized zone where the continuing enemy buildup directly threatens allied forward positions and where the movement of their troops and supplies are clearly related to that threat.

**HARRY MCPHERSON:** I had cut off the peroration, the ending of that speech, which was a kind of McPherson effort to write Churchillian. It had been on every draft of every speech from the beginning.

Clifford called me just before we met on that Saturday and said, "You know that peroration doesn't belong there anymore. The speech has changed. You can't make the kind of speech we've now got and then end it with the sort of 'we will fight them in the... lanes and the villages and the beaches' language that is in that peroration." So I just cut it off. I didn't have time to write a new one. Johnson asked me, "Where was it? I liked that." And I said, "Well, I didn't like it, it doesn't really fit with the speech. I'll go upstairs and write a new one. And I'll make it short because the speech is already a very long one." He said, "You don't need to worry about time. I may have a little ending of my own." And he walked out of the room leaving me and Clifford. I turned around to Clifford and said, "Good Lord, is he going to say 'sayonara', is he going to quit?" And Clifford looked at me as if I were out of my mind.

**CLARK CLIFFORD:** We'd all assumed of course that he would run. He loved the job. He reveled in it.

**HARRY MCPHERSON:** About five in the afternoon I got back to my office and Johnson called me and asked me what I thought about the speech that he was about to deliver in two or three hours. And I said I thought it was pretty good -- I was really proud and glad that we had turned, changed the speech. He said, "I've got an ending." I said, "I've heard that." He said, "Do you know what's in it?" I said, "I think so." He said, "What do you think about it?" And I said, "I'm very sorry, Mr. President." And he said, "Okay. So long pardner."

**PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON:** With America's sons in the fields far away, with America's future under challenge right here at home, with our hopes and the world's hopes for peace in the balance every day, I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes or to any duties other than the awesome duties of this office -- the presidency of your country. Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president.

**CLARK CLIFFORD:** As promptly as possible after he spoke, I had a press conference and announced formally that the 206,000 troops were not to be sent.

**April 11, 1968** This is part and parcel, I believe, of the President's decision to place a limitation at this time upon our troop level at a point not exceeding 550,000.

It seemed appropriate that it should be said -- if that's what he meant -- and I assumed that that was what he meant from the tone of his speech on March the 31. There were still those who very much wanted to -- the military still thought the matter was hanging fire. That ended it. After that statement was made publicly, there was no further comment about the 206,000 troops.

**NARRATOR:** *The Tet offensive had a further impact. In mid-May, North Vietnamese diplomats arrived in Paris to negotiate for the first time. That week the Vietcong launched a new offensive. Americans fought on, for the same objective: an independent South Vietnam. But after Tet the strategy changed. There were peace talks and the slow withdrawal of American troops. The talking and fighting went on for the next five years.*

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